

Sermon for All Saints' Highgate, Sunday, 12 December 2021

No Longer Ashamed (Zephaniah 3.14-20)

¹⁴Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵The Lord has taken away the judgements against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. ¹⁶On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

'Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. ¹⁷The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing ¹⁸as on a day of festival.'

'I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. ¹⁹I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. ²⁰At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes,' says the Lord.

I wonder if, looking back on your life, you've ever done anything of which you're deeply ashamed. I'm guessing that probably each one of us could identify something that we're ashamed of, if we're honest. And it's likely not something that you've talked about much, if at all, with your family or friends. That's the nature of shame: it's hidden, and covered over. This morning I want to explore with you some dimensions of shame, and what it might look like for shame to be transformed into praise. Because that's what the prophet Zephaniah articulates as a promise from God for the people of Israel.

It may be worth beginning by distinguishing between shame and guilt. Until relatively recently priests and therapists didn't really have shame as a category for explaining what people were dealing with. They were over-focused on guilt. Guilt is feeling badly about something that you've done, that you consider or know to be wrong. Shame is feeling awful about how and who you are. Shame is therefore deeper, and more all-encompassing than guilt. Guilt is relatively easy to address: through confession and forgiveness of sin. It's something addressed each week in our liturgy. Shame is much harder to get a handle on, relating to our whole being. Addressing it is therefore much more challenging. We will see whether we can open up some possibilities for healing, as we explore shame together this morning.

Let's begin with Zephaniah. He was prophesying in the late 7th century before Christ, during the reign of King Josiah, in the kingdom of Judah. The shame that Zephaniah is referring to, is the societal shame that the people of Israel experienced following the sacking of the northern kingdom by the Assyrian armies, and the deportation of all its leading citizens to Assyria. And it relates also to the widespread prostitution of the Israelites before the Canannite Baal gods, and the accompanying engagement with temple harlots, and the sacrificing of young children before the Baals

– all practices which King Josiah tried to reverse. This collective sin was a source of public shame for the Israelites, and led to the judgement of God against them.

The Japanese are familiar with this sort of public shame. In the 1930s, the Emperor of Japan launched his people on an imperial war against their neighbours, annexing parts of China, and later other Far Eastern countries. The Emperor was committed to establishing an Empire that could rival the British and other colonial empires, and enable the Japanese to hold their heads up high on the global stage. The Emperor was also considered a manifestation of the spirit of God, and was worshipped and obeyed unquestionably by the Japanese people – hence the emergence of the Kamikaze pilots, prepared to sacrifice themselves for the Emperor’s cause.

Following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, the Emperor and his generals surrendered, and Japan became subject to occupation by the Allied Forces. As part of this, the Emperor was forced to publicly give up his divinity. For the Japanese people, this defeat and this denigration of their Royal Imperial family was a deep source of public shame. The German people experienced something similar at the end of the First World World, under the Treaty of Versailles, when humiliated and punished by the other European nations. The French experienced something similar following the defeat of their Emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte, in 1815, at the battle of Waterloo. This is the type of public, societal shame and dishonour that Zephaniah was identifying when he addressed the Israelites. Shame and dishonour which causes a whole nation to hide their face in their hands before the wider world.

But the origins of shame go much further back in history, to the very origins of humanity. In Genesis 2 we read one account of the creation of humanity, which concludes with the telling sentence: ‘And the man and his wife were both naked, and were *not* ashamed.’ The result of Adam and Eve’s falling prey to the temptation to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil results in their eyes being opened, the revelation of themselves as naked, and their shame at their state. They then try to hide their shame through sewing garments for themselves. And to this day, nudity is typically considered shameful in most societies. The fifteenth century Italian painter, Masaccio, perfectly captures the shame of Adam and Eve, in the painting reproduced at the back, which you may have picked up with your service sheet. Adam covers his bowed face in his hands, in a classic posture of shame; while Eve covers her breasts and genitals, and cries out in despair. This is what shame looks like.

That's some of the historical perspective. How does shame bite for us today? I was struck to read this week of a new campaign under the hashtag #NoShameInSharing. This is a campaign seeking to tackle loneliness in our society. It's built on the sense that people are ashamed to admit to others that they feel lonely. I wonder whether this is particularly true for men in British society, and whether women find it easier to admit to their friends and neighbours that they are experiencing loneliness. Certainly I think it's true that men find it harder to admit to feelings of deep sadness, despair or depression, as these are typically deemed to be un-macho. Admitting to mental health difficulties can thus be difficult for us men. One result of this is the higher incidence of suicide among young men in Britain today. This is a fruit of a societal culture of shame about mental health problems.

Let me return to my opening wondering, about whether you've ever done anything of which you're ashamed. When I think back to my teenage years, there's an incident which happened when I was 16 years old. I took a train back from London to Thatcham in Berkshire, the nearest station to our family home. This was in the days when you could board a train and pay the ticket inspector on the journey. However, by the time I'd got to Reading, where I needed to change onto a branch line, no ticket inspector had turned up. So, once on board the little train towards Thatcham, when the inspector came along, I thought that I'd save myself some money by telling him that I'd started my journey in Reading. But the inspector challenged me, and said he didn't believe me. Because the Reading Festival was on that weekend, and the police weren't letting anyone onto the platforms at Reading without a valid train ticket. I was caught out, and shame-facedly admitted my lie, and paid for a ticket from London. But the inspector didn't let it pass, and took down my details. A few weeks later, I was deeply embarrassed when my father accosted me and asked about a letter which had arrived from the British Transport Police asking me to report to them at Reading station. My father had opened the letter in error, thinking it was addressed to him. To my shame, I had to admit what had happened. Not only had I been found out, but I'd been shamed before my father, who was embarrassed that I'd lied to try and save a little money. It's one of those incidents that I still cringe about when I think back on it. Even if it helped to teach me the painful lesson that it's never worth lying to try to save some money. Your sins will find you out!

When I asked a neighbour recently whether she'd ever done anything of which she was ashamed, she nodded sheepishly that she had: she told how, when a teenager, she'd rejected and turned her back on her then best friend, because she'd found another girl whom she liked better, and wanted as a new best friend. She added this comment:

“My action then, haunts me to this day. I’ve tried in vain to search social media and the internet to track this girl down, without success. As an adult, I so want to apologise to her.” I heard a combination of both shame, and unassuaged guilt in her story.

To get a better handle on shame, let’s turn to the story of June, a single woman in her early 30s, with a job as a solicitor.¹ June was struggling to hold things together, and fear of losing her job led her to consult her GP. The GP prescribed anti-depressants, and advised her to seek counselling. June was part of a conservative Christian congregation, and decided that she’d only see a Christian counsellor. Once she found one, what she presented to the counsellor was difficulty doing her job properly. But it soon became apparent that the origins of her struggles lay further back in her past, in her childhood. Gradually, as she built a relationship of trust with the counsellor, June was able to dig into her traumatic childhood. First to come to light was the reality of her mother not having shown her any demonstration of love. This was epitomised by her mother exclaiming one day: “You weren’t planned, my girl. I hated every moment of carrying you. And you’ve been a bloody nuisance ever since.”

Next to come to light was sexual interference by her much older sister, who later stopped the abuse when she formed a lesbian relationship with a girl her own age. And then, most deeply buried was the truth about June’s father, whom she’d idolised, but who’d been very absent from the family through much of her childhood. Her father had died suddenly of a heart attack when June was 29 years old. Eventually, with support from her counsellor, deeply buried memories of molestation surfaced, from when June was just five or six years old. This was partly prompted by her re-establishing a relationship with her older sister. Who, when June revealed that she was undergoing intensive therapy, asked whether June had ever been interfered with by their father – as had happened to the older sister.

Eventually, what emerged from the depths of June’s soul, beyond an acute feeling of worthlessness, was a deep sense of shame. One symptom of this was June’s habit of wearing shapeless baggy black clothes, to hide her body from others. It was a sense of shame that went back as far as June could remember, and related to her whole sense of herself: a dark desire to hide herself away from others, convinced that she was unlovable, and dirty.

What is the cure for shame? It’s certainly not straightforward, as those experiencing deep chronic shame are often socially alienated people who are typically cut off from the people and communities who might best help them.

¹ Adaption of a story in *With Unveiled Face: A Pastoral and Theological Exploration of Shame*, by Paul Gooliff (DLT, 2005).

Three things were crucial for June in finding healing from her shame. First, was working with a trust-worthy professional who accompanied her through the journey of facing herself and her past, without any judgement. Second, was identifying shame at the root of her being, when it was manifesting itself as depression and dysfunction. And third, and equally important, was being part of a loving Christian community, who accepted June as she was, and stood faithfully by her through her ordeal.

One other thing proved a turning point for June: one night, instead of her usual dreams of violence, darkness and sexual assault, June dreamt of seeing the face of Jesus. She'd not expected this. She'd always thought God was a harsh task-master, like her mother, and not a loving companion. The face of Jesus that she saw in her dream was open, welcoming, and with a flicker across the eyes of sheer joy. Somehow June grasped that this Jesus loved her unconditionally, without reservation, and without any hidden agendas. This face accepted her fully for who she was: broken, sullied, fearful, lost and, yes, ashamed.

After talking this dream through with her counsellor, one of the steps that June then took was to find a painted icon of Christ that reminded her of the face that she'd seen in her dream. She gazed on this icon each morning in her private time of prayer, to remind herself that she no longer needed to hide herself, but could bask before the face of the one who deeply loved and accepted her.

After the conclusion of her therapeutic work, June fell in love with a man in her church, was married, and had children of her own. She renewed her relationship with her sister, and, although coming from a church with a conservative theology, she was able to embrace her sister with her new lesbian partner. June had found that God had fulfilled his promise through Zephaniah. In the loving face of Jesus, God had truly turned her shame into praise.

May it be so, for all who have to do battle with shame in their lives.